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East Meets West: Refocusing Communication and Journalism Education

Commentary

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Writing, reporting, interviewing and editing remain the pillars of any journalism programme. The problem is what journalism educators put around these pillars, how they are made internationally relevant and given an intellectual foundation. The difficulty with journalism today is that it's at the bottom of the pile in terms of what readers and viewers think of its trustworthiness. Something has to be done to redeem its credibility and social responsibility. John Herbert refers to a new book *The Dao of the Press* (Gunaratne, Shelton, 2005) in proposing an approach to journalism education that may reclaim the profession's credibility.

Most non-Western journalism programs today are judged by their proximity to the goals and standards of Western media and democratic thoughts. These principles often don't easily relate to the principles and cultures of different national media and their views on their relationships with authority, the government and its citizens. The education offered to journalists in, for example, Europe or the United States should not become a travelling package deal for the Asia Pacific, the Middle East or South Asia. Journalism as practised in developing countries can and should have different foundations and functions that are shaped by different political philosophies that make those countries what they are.

For years I have believed that journalism textbooks should be as localised as practicable, and targeted for local journalism as practised within respective cultures and nations. It's thus pleasing to see the way journalism research is developing in Australia and Asia, where there are flourishing journals and books authored by local journalism educators every year. Even more welcome and a sign for the future is the collaborative projects between Australian and Asian journalism academics, the latest of which is a book *Journalism and Democracy in Asia* (Romano & Bromley, 2005) edited by academics from Queensland University of Technology and University of Queensland with chapters by journalism academics from Singapore, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, South Korea, and Japan. Then there are the increasing links with the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) in Singapore. The bridging of East and West at the institutional level, however, needs to filter through to the curriculum.

Local relevance is what is so often missing from journalism education. This is where a university in Hong Kong, Singapore, China and, indeed, Australia can really score. Journalism educators need to rethink the underlying philosophies of their teaching approaches to the elucidation of, for instance, the media process and democracy, ethics and freedom in the context of different cultural systems. Stop replicating Eurocentric or Americo-centric thought and practice. Develop an indigenous approach to journalism education and thereby create an indigenous form of localised journalism. This view has been strongly reinforced by a new book, *The Dao of the Press* (Gunaratne, 2005), which reiterates these thoughts and knits Eastern and Western philosophy to create a foundation for what could arguably be a more ethical form of professional journalism.

The book poses possible concepts for journalism educators to consider. Just how difficult can be gleaned from comments by the author in the acknowledgements detailing the difficulty of even getting the manuscript read by reviewers, let alone approved for publication. This manuscript, wrote one anonymous reviewer,

“represents an ambitious attempt to propose a global press philosophy...that would synthesise a number of perennial issues ranging across philosophical, political, and even religious topics related to public communication”
(Gunaratne, 2005: xiii).

Another anonymous reviewer thought the manuscript was animated by

“the need to move away from restrictive Eurocentric ideas of the press and to adopt a more inclusive attitude drawing on the wisdom of the East” (ibid:xiv).

The book points to the importance of a philosophical and ethical approach that in itself is global -- if a globalised approach to media is to be balanced with localised journalism based on national cultural journalistic morality. Because that is what is now needed, the dangers of globalisation and media convergence have to be counteracted by an underlying philosophy that drags journalism back from the depths, to which many say it has sunk, to the mountains of honesty, credibility and objectivity. Thus, the future of journalism education needs to be rethought to encompass these needs to save journalism, and bring it back to the world of responsibility and morality. To do this, more thought needs to be given to the core foundation of journalism practice and theory, and this is not the skill once so beloved of us all, but rather the foundations of ethics and honesty that arise from journalists who know, and are taught, how to think for themselves. The future needs thinking journalists, not just practically sceptical ones.

Journalism has also to understand that global journalism practices aren't necessarily the way of the future because each nation is fighting for its own continuing cultural and literary independence; what is not wanted is Coca Cola journalism all emanating in standards and approaches from the intellectual equivalent of Atlanta, Georgia. Hence my interest in *The Dao of the Press*, which looks at how Eastern philosophy is relevant to continual efforts to raise the standards of journalism globally and locally.

Gunaratne says that his critical message is to apply the wisdom of the East to develop a "humanocentric theory" of communication, free expression and journalism:

"Rather than waiting for the Occidental stamp of approval, Eastern scholars should engage in humanocentric theory building by methodically mining their indigenous literature"(APME 2004).

By Eastern he is largely concerned with Indian philosophy based on Hinduism and Brahmanism. With Confucianism and Daoism, his approach, with a bit of tweaking, could apply to developing a better journalism curriculum that takes the best from both West and East, developing and developed, democratic and authoritarian, to become something indigenous that plucks from elsewhere all the positives and rejects all the negatives, its own included.

The book argues that we need to get away from news as a commodity and return to the origins of news values and social good. Gunaratne makes the point that a Western approach to journalism is more concerned with a negative rather than a positive approach, and generally means the immunity of the communication outlets from government control or censorship either directly through laws and regulation or indirectly through economics and political pressures. He reminds us of the American journalist Stanley Walker who, in the 1930s, defined news values as the three Ws; women (sex), wampum (money) and wrong doing (crime). Of course, what it's really about is conflict, either real or increasingly manufactured by journalists, or editors in search of a good story:

"The emphasis on conflict goes against Confucian harmony. Carrying these news values to the extreme signifies the treatment of news as a commodity rather than as a social good... In practice, however, depending on the sociocultural context, news as a commodity exists in Asia as well (e.g., Hong Kong's *Apple Daily*, Japan's *Nikkan Gendai*, South Korea's *Ilyo Shinmun*,

Thailand's *Thai Rath*, etc). Thus, although operationally closed, the pattern of journalism in Asia's freepress countries in particular is very much cognitively open to the powerful presence of West-centric journalism in their environment. However, broadly speaking, Asian journalism can never be the mirror image of Western journalism because of the socio-cultural distinction between the independent individual in the Western sense and the individual-within-networks in the Eastern sense ...the former presumes the independence of the part (the individual) from the whole (or the environment) whereas the latter presumes a fundamental connection between the two" (Gunaratne 2005: 141-142).

That is the fundamental lack in current journalism education and which needs to be addressed and rectified. What this book asks for, and what indeed we desperately need in our journalism, and first in our journalism education, despite the unpopularity of making such a call, is an ethic of social responsibility:

" Social responsibility in journalism practice in Asia is consistent with the promotion of developmental journalism, which is vastly different from government-say-so journalism...which some Asian leaders are trying to falsely equate with Asian values. The major Asian philosophies do not condone the misuse of media by the rulers to suppress opposing views or muzzle constructive criticism" (ibid., p.143).

Each culture determines the meaning of social responsibility and it is precisely this which needs to be included in future journalism education programs. There are many forms of journalism and they can all be positive sources for social good as opposed to the predominantly conflict-oriented reporting. It also needs to be recognised that each nation can and should produce its own form of journalism using the culture within it. So the way journalism is practised, and therefore taught, in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia should not be benchmarked in relationship to one specific country, which normally means relating it to either the UK or US, but mainly the US.

The easiest way to change this is to look for local examples in writing stories during a writing course; of looking for local examples of good and not so good writing and features. Once this step is taken it paves a path towards achieving a local approach to journalism education which, given time, will give birth to a form of journalism that is culturally relevant.

If journalism courses are to combat or at least investigate the rights and wrongs of creeping globalisation, they need to look at the relationship between different cultures and its reactions to the social responsibility of journalism. This can be seen as a grown-up approach to a journalism curriculum that takes the best and rejects the worst from both West and East to become something home grown for universities in Asia and elsewhere.

Journalism in an ideal world should be above market forces. But of course it cannot be because everyone has to make a living out of it – in that journalism is no different to any other profession or trade. Newspapers, magazines and most broadcasters are there to make money. The alternative is even worse – state funded and state controlled media. Eastern journalism does not have to follow this principle and

blindly fall into the same pitfalls as media in the West have. The elephant traps are there for all to see. Journalism education can heed these warnings, observe the elephant traps and step over them gently but firmly.

The future rests on courses that, apart from containing all the elements required for modern media professionalism, examine the differences - and similarities - between Western and Eastern journalism. First, thorough research is needed on the comparisons, and indeed on what is the basis of Eastern journalism. This means expanding the range of media related courses and modules specific to this form of integration and awards both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels that realise the potential of this integration. The basis of research is already there -- it just needs harnessing.

What an Eastern communications and journalism curriculum needs is research based on theoretical questions from Asian cultures, literature, philosophies, religions, and history. To achieve that there may have to be some redefinition of the curriculum, and an across-the-board integrated relationship between journalism and other relevant disciplines offered across different Schools/Faculties. Modern journalism education, I believe, is about tearing down fences not building them. If we tear down the barricades we remove the isolationism that is so often the charge levelled at journalists.

Contemporary journalism education should work side-by-side with other disciplines in other universities, not just their own, and use them whenever and however necessary to produce better journalists. As Stephen Quinn notes:

Content is no longer king. Too much content is available in an information-soaked world (hence notions of information overload and data smog). It is quality content that reigns supreme in the early 21st century. The only way to get quality content is through knowledgeable and educated staff -- people who can create unique and quality content based on their specialist skills (Quinn 2004).

Journalism for the future is not just learning to be a journalist; it's about learning to be an educated journalist, a thinking journalist. This practical side of journalism education only really works if it has an intellectual foundation, a basis on which to grow the business of journalism skills later in the course. And this practical aspect of journalism work can only work and have its own credibility if it is also based on research. Teaching without research becomes stilted teaching. Only with the food of research can journalism teaching live and grow. Research infuses teaching, and teaching sometimes provides the bedrock of new research. In any case, the two are inseparable. So any School of Journalism needs to conduct research that focuses on significant issues within society and that informs education and professional practice in journalism and communication. To do this in future might also mean adopting a multi university as well as multi disciplinary approach to journalism education so that the principles and practices of all can be interchanged, examined, modified, perfected.

This is already happening in a small way in an innovative link between University of Queensland in Brisbane, James Cook University in Townsville, and Deakin University in Victoria with the *NewsPlex* research centre at the University of South

Carolina in the United States. They have their own web site, which gives full details of what they are trying to achieve. (<http://au.geocities.com/acjsig/>). The academics – John Cokley of University of Queensland's School of Journalism, Lindsay Simpson at James Cook, and Stephen Quinn at Deakin, – have formed the Australian Convergent Journalism Special Interest Group (ACJ-SIG 2005).

Cokley says he hopes other university journalism departments will follow suit, either by joining the ACJ-SIG or by launching affiliations of their own:

“I think establishing and operating think-tanks such as this says a lot about the journalism approach to professionalism and forward thinking in the industries of journalism and journalism education.”

Simpson says, also on the website:

“If we are preparing students for a changing media world, then we should be teaching them to cope in that world. It will no longer be acceptable to simply say you are a print, radio or television journalist (ACJ-SIG 2005).

One way in which a multi-university and intercultural approach to journalism education is seen in the way *Newsplex* and its affiliates interact to teach students, and in which news staff and students collaborate via videoconferencing, online knowledge bases and broadband connections. Students at both ends of such a linkage, perhaps in China, Hong Kong, Dubai, Australia and New Zealand could collaborate in live, multiple-media, digitally supported news handling.

In April 2005, I watched with interest just such a live experiment between Hong Kong Baptist University communication students and similar students at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. We saw what could be the future in collaborative live online seminars, teaching sessions, practical workshops and discussions so that understanding between the two approaches to journalism and communication were analysed, picked over, dissected and rebuilt, all in the space of an hour's session. There have since been two more link-ups, one with National Chengchi in Taiwan and Ball State in Indiana together (their time near midnight), and once with National Chengchi alone. The latter was a meeting of students working on their respective newspapers exchanging experiences (not a formal lecture); students loved it! (Wang 2005). The practical benefits of such a multicultural relationship to teach and research and express the benefits of different journalism civilisations are enormous. This is the future.

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